

*CRACKED PIANO*, Margo Taft Stever. CavanKerry Press, 5 Horizon Rd. #2403, Fort Lee, NJ 07024, 2019, \$16 paper, www.cavankerrypress.org.

One of the marks of any strong poetry collection is that it appears precisely when it feels most necessary. Margo Taft Stever's *Cracked Piano* debuts in a time fraught with political turmoil that rivals any within recent memory. Nationally and globally, competing narratives of reality battle for our attention and allegiance. These stark, urgent poems may not be overtly political, but they are deeply political: they speak of imposed silence, in various forms.

The poems of *Cracked Piano* center upon the story of Stever's great-grandfather, who in the late 1870s was sent to the Cincinnati Sanitarium, Private Hospital for the Insane. A brilliant and eccentric man admitted for undisclosed behaviors, he there experienced what was thought to be the best treatment of the day: isolation. Isolated from family and friends, if not from other patients, he recorded his experience in letters that Stever excerpts and builds upon.

The title poem is based on a letter that the poet's great-grandfather wrote to his father. It begins, *I am alone this evening as every, / alone*. The line break creates a striking ambiguity in *every*, which may mean every evening or every person—or both.

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This is Stever's essential subject: the individual's reality and hunger for connection with the larger world. The poem's next wise and wry lines provide fascinating context: *An artist of imperfect / mind is endeavoring to extract / harmonious discords out of a cracked / piano just at my left*. Now we realize that the speaker is not literally alone but rather psychically alone. These lines can be read as Stever's *ars poetica*: The poet's calling is to craft song, if broken song, from a battered instrument; that is, a poet works with the material available and works language so as to make that subject sing.

Like any good poet, Stever knows that imagery makes language both memorable and metaphoric. The great-grandfather writes asking for *the old / hunting case watch that I got when / in Paris*. The haunting "The Lunatic Ball" includes the lines, *A woman names her baby doll Christ, lurches, / leans, a building in an earthquake*. The sense of isolation and dislocation is consistent throughout this collection, resonating through poems that reach beyond the great-grandfather into later generations. The poem "Animal Crackers" includes the unexpected and unsettling lines spoken by an unidentified child, *Sometimes I eat them / in the closet where it's dark. / I can feel the severed legs // at the bottom of the box*.

Horses appear throughout this volume, beginning with the powerful first poem, "Idiot's Guide to Counting," which opens:

*How do you become one  
with the horse, riding and becoming  
the act of riding  
and the horse becoming the self  
and the other at exactly  
the same second. . .*

From the bold, poignant beseeching of the first line, through the gerund-driven second and third lines, through the hammer of the repetitive "and," we arrive at this volume's central questions: How do we become one with the other? How do we break free of the constraints that our bodies, with societal sanction, impose upon us?

"Horse Fair," about Rosa Bonheur's painting *The Horse Fair*, begins,

*In men's clothes,  
she makes herself  
invisible to examine  
anatomy at the slaughterhouse.  
She obtains  
a police permit  
to wear trousers  
while she sketches.*

Poets, take note of the power of line break, as in the quiet burst of */s/* *he obtains*. In other words, she prevails. Surface compliance with the authorities gains Bonheur entry to the slaughterhouse, so that she can study the hidden structure of the horse. She readies for her encounter with

the actual horses. This is quiet work. One imagines heavy silence save for the scratch of Bonheur's pencil.

Further into the poem, at the fair, Stever's lines writhe with the energy of the beautiful, entrapped beasts: *horses / pulling, snorting, / heads bumping, / thrashing, hooves / pounding, tails wringing, / charging forward, / rearing, bucking, wheeling, / disappearing into darkness*. As if at the center of this terrifying chaos, the painter/poet silently records. This poem reads as a salute to the horses and an indictment of the beast who would fence them, trade them.

*Cracked Piano* is published in CavanKerry's Literature of Illness imprint, which explores *issues associated with confronting serious physical and/or psychological illness* (front matter). Even without this respected designation, it is clear that disease permeates this volume. Many poems speak through or for a contemporary suburban woman who experiences the alienation and loneliness that suburbia seems designed to produce. These emotions echo those of Stever's institutionalized great-grandfather, but the focus of the prototypical Stever poem is not the person who experiences the emotion; rather, the focus is upon the emotion itself. Like Louise Glück, she uses the first-person pronoun while holding the personal at a distance. Like Glück, Stever is more interested in the larger

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world than in herself, which may well be the most potent political dimension of this volume.

Stever eschews autobiography, reaches instead for the essence of story, for the felt experience of being alive in these times. She chooses lyric over narrative, mystery over resolution. Her pointedly cryptic "Hand" concludes, *A hand can be a monastery, // fingers bent in repose, / or a slaughterhouse / where nothing is safe*.

Nothing is safe. And nothing will make Stever turn from this hard fact, in poem after poem. Margo Taft Stever is a poet who found her distinctive voice early: spare, taut, steely. Over several full-length collections, this voice has developed a resonance and depth on full display in *Cracked Piano*. This book arrives as if on cue: a voice of maturity and wide empathy in a world of fear-mongering, unafraid.

Suzanne Cleary